

BOOKS

ADVERTISING AGED

Taschen volumes feature two decades of Madison Avenue selling the sizzle

BY JOE MACLEOD

ADVERTISING IS EVIL and terrifying, a system of mind control imposing upon the unsuspecting masses a brutal basis of artificial needs and desires, satisfied only through unnecessary and illogical consumption of goods and services. The hell you say? No it's not, hippie, advertising is a tool, that's all, a way to show the world a path to your door after you build the better mousetrap. You have been watching too much of that cynical made-up *Mad Men* program on the cable television and you need to learn to appreciate the graphic design excellence, wit, and ingenuity of the arguably American, arguably art form that is advertising. Plus, it is good for the economy.

"Our brand-new client's marketing problem boiled down to this: We had to sell a Nazi car in a Jewish town." — George Lois

Esteemed art/porn/art publisher Taschen has recently published *Mid-Century Ads: Advertising From the Mad Men Era*, a timely two-volume 720-page edition (one for the "The Fifties" and one for "The Sixties") featuring large reproductions of many documentarily interesting, visually striking, remarkable print ads, great and not so great, from each titular decade. The ads are grouped thematically by color (pink toilet paper, light bulbs, lipsticks, typewriters, stoves, refrigerators) and product type (beer, automobiles, cigarettes, brassieres) and there are lots of surprising images equal to that powerful, wow-we-really-didn't-know-anything rush of shock experienced watching the folks on *Mad Men* smoke while in the office, smoke while in an airplane, smoke while feeding a baby, etc.

"Advertising reflects the mores of society, but does not influence them. The word *fuck* is more commonplace in contemporary literature, but has yet to appear in advertisements." — David Ogilvy

Both volumes have "endpieces" composed of a timeline of each decade, and these spreads may be somewhat obscure to anyone who isn't a student of the history of American media and the ad game or over 50 years old, but they are a good jumping-off point for anyone interested in exploring such history. Containing notable benchmarks in graphic design, pop culture (OK, television), and a teensy bit of "real" history, such as the successful flight of the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' Sputnik satellite in the '50s and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in the '60s, these charts attempt to contextualize the pages that accompany them.

The significance of graphic design milestones such as William Golden's CBS "eye" logo, "based on a Pennsylvania Dutch hex sign," Paul Rand's IBM logo, and what eventually would become the typeface Helvetica—according to a brief, scholarly preface to the '50s volume by editor, graphic designer, and prolific repurposer of American advertising Jim Heimann—mark the transformation of stodgy, long-winded post-WWII era print communication through "mid-century modern" up to the "big idea" approach. This last featured the iconic product imagery identified with Marlboro cigarettes, Kellogg's Sugar Frosted Flakes, Coppertone suntan lotion, Volkswagens, and million-dollar slogans such as "Good to the last drop," "Leave the driving to us," "Does she... or doesn't she," and the 1960s' "Think Small" for Volkswagen, which opened up a giant crack in the Earth and changed the ad game forever.

Many of the campaigns shown in *Mid-Century Ads* cemented the reps of giant advertising firms that are still around in one form or another: Ogilvy, Benson and Mather, Foote, Cone and Belding, and the legendary Leo Burnett agency, which has been pushing Marlboro cowboy-killers for Phillip Morris since 1955. And in 1945, Leo Burnett heralded the changes to come in the postwar era with a big print piece for red meat on behalf of the American Meat Institute's "This Is Life" campaign, featuring a striking photo of a raw, red rib roast set before an equally blood-red background.

"What would happen if you put a piece of red meat on a red background? ... It just intensified the red concept and the virility ... we were trying to express about meat." — Leo Burnett

Most people didn't think anything might be, let's say, questionable, about that stuff then, but we sure know now, and because they are so aggressively "modern," most of the images presented in this book, thankfully, defy gloopy nostalgia. But a big part of the fun in these volumes is a certain schadenfreude-y contempt you experience as you find yourself flipping through page after page of ads for cigars, cigarettes, giant gas-guzzling cars, atomic energy, Plexiglas®, Cheez Whiz, the Princess Phone, Morton Salt, Alcoa aluminum, Convair (makers of the U.S. Air Force's delta-winged, jet-powered F-102 supersonic fighter), and the Univac 120, "the advanced punched card computer."

Women in the '50s and '60s had a long way to go, baby, and there are lots of pages devoted to feminine hygiene, depilatories, complexion aids, girdles that aren't girdles, hosiery designed to "fool a 32-year-old legman at 22 paces," and questions such as "Do you sweat?" and "What's the ugliest part of your body?" In 1968, ads for Whirlpool refrigerators were addressed to "Ma'am." We'll leave it to the ladies to decide if they can laugh about it now.

Prolific design writer Steven Heller contributes introductions to both volumes and lays a giant slice of doublethink on us:

Advertising is, after all, artificial truth. Of course, certain claims are accurate — makeup hides blemishes, soda is sweet, bad breath smells, headaches hurt, and sunglasses shade the eyes. Definitely, by the Sixties, phony snake oil and patent medicine advertisements from the turn of the century were long since abolished. Yet advertising, especially at this time, was nonetheless designed to outsmart, outdo, and outsell competition no matter what it was, through whatever means were tolerable within the parameters of so-called "truth in advertising" doctrines — which is a concept akin to allowing acceptable amounts of rat hair in food.

Fabrications and exaggerations existed, but no one cared because the images, words, and concepts toed the line between the possible and the posterous.

The truth will set you free, or drive you mad, man. ■

CIGARS, CIGARETTES, GIANT GAS-GUZZLING CARS, ATOMIC ENERGY, PLEXIGLAS®, CHEEZ WHIZ, THE PRINCESS PHONE, MORTON SALT, ALCOA ALUMINUM, CONVAIR (MAKERS OF THE U.S. AIR FORCE'S DELTA-WINGED, JET-POWERED F-102 SUPERSONIC FIGHTER), AND THE UNIVAC 120, "THE ADVANCED PUNCHED CARD COMPUTER."



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